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THE PORTRAITS
OF
SIR THOMAS BROWNE.



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THE PORTRAITS
OF
Sir Thomas Browne.*



THERE are in existence three portraits of Sir Thomas Browne: one in the Bodleian Library, the second in the Royal College of Physicians, London, and the third in the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. They may be designated respectively as the Bodleian, the London, and the Norwich portraits. The three are painted on canvas, are in good condition, and are unquestionably original. There is a marked difference in all, not only in the cast of countenance, but in the general appearance of the face, and in the details of the dress and the disposition of them. They were, in all probability, painted about the same period, or within a few years of one another, and subsequently to the year 1669, as will be demonstrated, and, therefore, after his sixty-fourth year of age; they represent him as being over the middle period of life; all possess a somewhat melancholy visage

* 'Notes and Queries,' July 13; 1895.

not unlike that of Charles I., which they closely resemble in style ; all look to the left of the spectator. It is unfortunate that the names of the painters are unknown ; in only one instance—that of Norwich—is the donor's name preserved. They are situated in places intimately associated with the life of Sir Thomas—the Bodleian portrait at Oxford, where he had spent some years as a student at Pembroke College, and of which university he was B.A., M.A., and M.D. ; the next in the Royal College of Physicians, London, of which he was elected an Honorary Fellow in 1664 ; and the third at Norwich, the city in which for forty-six years he lived and practised as a physician, and in which he died and is buried.

The writer of Sir Thomas Browne's life in 'Biographia Britannica' * says :—

“His picture in the College of Physicians shews him to have been remarkably handsome, and to have possessed in a singular degree the blessing of a grave and yet cheerful and inviting countenance. As to his temper it was perfectly even and free from passions.....His virtues were many and remarkably conspicuous, his probity such as gained him universal respect.”

Mr. Whitefoot,† the rector of Heigham, who was intimately acquainted with him for two-thirds of his life, observes :—

“For a character of his person, his complexion and hair was answerable to his name, his stature was moderate and habit of body neither fat nor lean, in his habit of clothing he had an aversion to all finery, and affected plainness both

* 1780, vol. ii.

† 'Posthumous Works,' 1712.

in the fashion and ornaments. He ever wore a cloak, or boots, when few others did. He kept himself always very warm and thought it most safe so to do, though he never loaded himself with such a multitude of garments as Suetonius reports of Augustus, enough to clothe a good family. He was never seen to be transported with mirth or dejected with sadness; always cheerful but rarely merry, at any sensible rate, seldom heard to break a jest, and when he did he would be apt to blush at the levity of it; his gravity was natural without affectation."

THE BODLEIAN PORTRAIT.

This likeness is located in the Bodleian Library; no record has been preserved of either the donor or the painter, and the date of its reception is unknown. The picture itself is twenty-nine by twenty-four inches, is a half-length, about three-quarter face, and slightly turned to the left of the spectator. Sir Thomas is represented in a plain black gown, most probably "the cloak he ever wore," with his arms folded in front as if holding it up; a broad, plain white falling collar, the edges of which are attached to each other in front their whole length; his hair is dark brown, long, and flowing, and parted down the middle; he wears a moustache and a tuft of hair on his chin—an imperial—also divided down the middle, and scarcely any whisker. This portrait is unquestionably the best of the three, and was painted from the living subject between 1669 and 1672, most probably after he was knighted, September, 1671. It has been engraved by six artists, three being Flemish and three English: Van den Hove, Van der Banck, Van der Gucht, Robert White, Thomas Trotter, and W. C. Edwards.

The first four lived and flourished as engravers in the lifetime of Sir Thomas.

Van den Hove's engraved portrait appears in "the sixth and last edition" of 'Pseudodoxia Epidemica,' published in 1672, at which date Sir Thomas was sixty-seven years of age. The portrait is in a plain oval frame, without ornament, and was, without doubt, engraved from the Bodleian. He is looking to the right of the spectator.* (*Page 12.*)

Van der Banck's † engraving forms the frontispiece to 'Certain Miscellany Tracts,' published in 1684, two years after the death of Sir Thomas. This work was edited by Archbishop Tenison, who says, "Concerning the author, I chuse to be silent, though I have had the happiness to have been for some years known to him." The Archbishop was minister of St. Peter Mancroft in 1674, consequently well known to Sir Thomas Browne, who was a resident in the parish at that time. The portrait is finely engraved, is in an ornamental oval frame, and represents the great man looking to the right of the spectator. We must assume that this was a perfect likeness, or its appearance in this book would not have been permitted by Lady Browne, Edward Browne, and the Archbishop.

Van der Gucht's ‡ engraving appeared in 'The Posthu-

* Van den Hove was born at Haarlem 1630 ; he was much employed as an engraver by the booksellers in London on portrait frontispieces between 1648 and 1692. The portraits of many eminent Englishmen were engraved by him. He was found murdered Oct. 17th, 1698. According to Bryan he died after 1715.

† Van der Banck, born in Paris 1649, came to England 1674, died 1697.

‡ Van der Gutch was born at Antwerp 1660, died 1725.

mous Works of the learned Sir Thomas Browne,' published in 1712, thirty years after the death of the author. The portrait is beautifully executed, in a plain oval frame, with a coat of arms beneath; he looks to the right of the spectator. An edition of this work was brought out the same year by a different publisher, but without a portrait; the edition of 1723 contains one by the same artist.

Robert White* engraved the portrait which forms the frontispiece to the folio edition of Browne's works, "the seventh and last," 1686, published four years after the death of the "light of Norwich." It is larger than the others, is a charming work of art, in a plain oval frame, with a full coat of arms beneath; and that no doubt should ever arise respecting the authority of the picture, it is stated to be "The True Effigies of Sir Tho. Browne, of Norwich, Knt., M.D." He looks to the spectator's right.

Thomas Trotter.† An exquisite engraving by this artist appeared in 1815 in Malcolm's 'Lives of Topographers and Antiquaries.'

W. C. Edwards‡ engraved the portrait to be seen in Simon Wilkin's edition of Sir Thomas Browne's works, published in four volumes in 1836, and which the editor says,—

"was engraved by Mr. Edwards from White's in the folio of 1686, compared with a copy taken by Dr. Bandinell's kind permission from the original in the

* Robert White, a very prolific engraver of great repute, was born in London 1645, died 1704.

† Thomas Trotter obtained a considerable reputation for his portraits; born 1785, died 1803.

‡ W. C. Edwards was living in 1841. He etched the series of "Norfolk Portraits."

schools of Oxford, a decidedly better picture than that presented by Dr. Howman to the vestry of St. Peter, Norwich, and I believe than that which is in the College of Physicians."

This is not so finely executed an engraving as those by the Flemish artists, although of the same style and character.

THE LONDON PORTRAIT.

This likeness is to be seen in the Royal College of Physicians, London; it measures twenty-four by twenty inches, is a half-length, three-quarter face, and looks to the left of the spectator. Dr. Munk* observes:—

"The College of Physicians possesses a good portrait of this distinguished Physician. Although I can find in the annals no mention of the donor, we shall not probably be far from the truth if we attribute it to Dr. Edward Browne—Sir Thomas's son—a distinguished Fellow and President of the College."

It has the same sombre look as the Bodleian, the same flowing hair parted down the middle, a small moustache, and rather large imperial, also divided down the middle, and a small amount of whisker. He wears a black gown, the edges of which are trimmed with fur, probably an academical or doctor's gown of that day. The arms are not folded in front, so that the gown flows smoothly down, quite unlike that of the other portraits. Sir Thomas looks somewhat

* 'Roll of the Royal College of Physicians, 1878, vol. i., p. 326.

older in this than in the others ; a falling, plain white collar, the edges being attached to each other their whole length in front, similar to what is seen in the Bodleian, but different from that which is noticed in the Norwich picture. This portrait has been engraved by only one artist, J. Brown. It is carefully executed, and represents him looking to the spectator's left, and forms the frontispiece to 'Christian Morals,' published by Rivington, 1863.*

THE NORWICH PORTRAIT.

This likeness is placed in the Board Room of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. It measures twenty-eight by twenty-three inches, is a half-length, three-quarter face, and looks to the left of the spectator. He appears in the characteristic long flowing hair or wig of a dark colour, parted down the middle, the moustache light brown, a tuft of hair on the chin resembling an imperial, also divided down the middle, whiskers not abundant and mostly along the lower jaw. He wears a plain, broad white falling collar, the front margins of which meet at the upper points and open out downwards ; two short tassels hang from the point of junction, unlike the disposition of the collar in the other paintings. The gown is somewhat indistinct, but is most probably the cloak he was so partial to. The features

* In the charming edition of 'Religio Medici,' edited by Dr. W. A. Greenhill, Macmillan, 1885 : "The vignette of Sir Thomas Browne was engraved by the late C. H. Jeens, from the painting in the Library of the Royal College of Physicians."

correspond entirely with those in the other portraits of the great man. No engraving has been made of this picture, but an indifferent lithograph is to be occasionally met with.

This portrait was presented to the parish of St. Peter Mancroft by Dr. Edward Howman, the owner and occupier of the house in which Sir Thomas Browne lived and died. Bloomfield alludes to the residence in the parish of St. Peter, which was formerly tenanted by the famous knight, and "in which Dr. Howman now lives,"* but makes no reference to the portrait.

There exists in the parish records no note of the date of its presentation. Dr. E. Howman died in 1753 and was buried in the adjoining church of St. Stephen, where there is a monument to his memory. How he became possessed of the portrait cannot now be traced. Miss Howman, his lineal descendant, has carefully searched the family papers without any satisfactory result. Circumstances favour the idea that when the residence was sold, after Lady Browne's death in 1685, by her son Edward to Dr. Roger Howman, of "The Red Well," Norwich, and the father of Edward, who was then seven years of age, that the portrait was left in the house or given to his friend, Roger Howman, with some other things, such as his carved oak mantelpiece, now in the possession of Henry Birkbeck, Esq., of Stoke Holy Cross, and that Edward Howman inherited it after his father's death; and as the family of Browne had almost died out,

* 'History of Norfolk,' folio, vol. ii., 1739:

the male line having become extinct in 1708, Edward Howman most probably bequeathed it as a legacy to the parish of St. Peter; and here it remained in the church until 1871, when the vestry were pleased to allow it to be placed in the Norwich Hospital, where it forms one of the most conspicuous of all the portraits in the Board Room of that institution.* It is still the property of St. Peter Mancroft.

Roger Howman and Edward Browne were fellow citizens; they were about the same age, followed the same profession; and very likely Edward Browne became godfather to Edward Howman, this Christian name being unknown in the family before then; and although Roger—the family name—was not given to the first-born, it was bestowed on the third son, which makes it appear the more probable that the name Edward was derived from Dr. Edward Browne, who was then thirty-six years of age, and in practice in London. He never resided permanently in Norwich, and after his mother's death sold the property he held in that city† to Dr. Roger Howman.

In addition to the three paintings there must have been a fourth, from which was engraved the portrait which appears in 'Pseudodoxia Epidemica,' fifth edition, 1669. This is a very indifferent work of art, totally unlike the learned author, executed by an unknown person, and dissimilar to

* The likenesses of nearly all who had done good work at this charity during the past hundred years were collected during the centenary year 1871, and placed in this room to commemorate the interesting event.

† 'The East Anglian,' vol. i., 1885, p. 194.

any already described. Sir Thomas thought badly of it, for three years later, 1672, when the next edition "the sixth and last" of this work, came out, this portrait had disappeared, and in its place is seen the finely engraved likeness by the Flemish artist Van den Hove, and evidently copied from the Bodleian, which it closely resembles in every particular. During those three years, 1669 to 1672, Sir Thomas had become a great man, his reputation as a scholar had risen to the highest pitch, his works had attracted considerable notice not only in England but on the Continent. Thirteen editions of 'Religio Medici' had appeared in rapid succession, besides eleven in other languages, and his fame had been maintained by the publication of "Hydriotaphia, or Urn Burial," * and the "Garden of Cyrus." Under these circumstances we have a right to assume that the name of one of the most distinguished of English writers was well known to Charles II., who to shew his appreciation of such literary ability as well as loyalty had the good feeling to express his sense of it, when visiting Norwich in 1671, by conferring on Dr. Browne the honour of knighthood. A good artist was now chosen to render permanent the "handsome face" of the new knight, and the Bodleian portrait was painted; when the new edition, "the sixth and last," of 'Pseudodoxia Epidemica' came out in 1672, it contained a likeness worthy of the author and the artist. (*Page 6.*)

* Which in 1671 had reached the fifth edition.